



# **Lost Dog Recovery Tips**

## **Welcome to the New Hampshire SPCA**

## Lost Dog Behavior

### Panicked Dogs

Many dogs, even dogs that normally are not fearful at home, become terrified when they become lost. While some dogs will ultimately calm down and then approach people, other dogs will continue to run from everyone, including their owners! One of the worst things that you can do is CALL a stray, loose, or panicked dog. That's because if too many people have already tried to capture the dog, calling him becomes a "trigger" that can cause him to automatically take off in fear when anyone, including his owner, calls him. Instead, you will want to use "Calming Signals" to calm the dogs fear and attract him to come towards you using specific body language and a food lure.

### Reasons Why Dogs Leave

The three most common reasons why dogs become separated from their families are opportunistic journey, wanderlust, and blind panic.

**Opportunistic journey** is when a gate or door is accidentally left open. While some dogs will remain in their yards or at their homes, most simply can't refuse the temptation to explore when presented the opportunity. Although these dogs might not actively attempt to leave, their noses just lead them on a journey that can take them blocks or even miles from home.

**Wanderlust** is a common problem in intact male dogs of any breed as well as certain breeds like hounds. These dogs will actively attempt to escape by climbing, digging, or wiggling to escape their yards. They will also bolt out a door or pull to get away from their handler if the opportunity presents itself. Wanderlust is responsible for the displacement of many dogs and a major contributing factor to the stray populations in our shelters.

**Blind panic** is a situation in which the "flight" instinct (from the hardwired "fight or flight" response to stimuli) kicks in and a dog runs in what we call a blind panic. This can happen for three reasons: xenophobic (skittish) temperament, loud noises (thunder, gunfire), or traumatic incident (involved in car accident, explosion, etc.). These dogs are the most difficult to catch since they will travel far, travel fast, and avoid human contact, even with their own family members!

NHSPCA Lost Pet Program

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**There are human behaviors, animal behaviors, and other factors that influence the distance that a lost dog will travel. When giving recovery advice to someone who has lost a dog, be sure to consider the following:**

## Factors That Influence Distances Traveled

There are six major factors that influence the distances that a lost dog will travel: Temperament, Circumstances, Weather, Terrain, Appearance, and Population Density.

### Temperament of the Dog

How a dog behaves towards strangers influences how far it will travel (when lost) before someone intervenes and rescues it. There are three primary behavioral categories of lost dogs: Gregarious Dogs, Aloof Dogs, and Xenophobic Dogs.

**Gregarious Dogs:** Wiggly-butt, friendly dogs are more inclined to go directly up to the first person who calls them. Depending on the terrain and population density where the dog was lost, these dogs will generally be found fairly close to home or will be picked up by someone close to the escape point. Gregarious dogs are often “adopted” by individuals (not shelter or rescue workers) who find them.

**Aloof Dogs:** Dogs with aloof temperaments are wary of strangers and will initially avoid human contact. They will be inclined to accept human contact only after they have overcome fear issues and become hungry enough. While these dogs can travel a great distance, aloof dogs eventually can be enticed with food and patience, typically by experienced rescuers who know how to approach and capture a wary dog. These dogs are often recovered by rescue group volunteers, and their wariness can be easily misinterpreted as “abused.” In addition, these dogs are often not recovered for weeks or months after their escape, giving them the physical appearance (thinness, injuries, stickers, ticks, etc.) that they are homeless, abused, and unloved.

**Xenophobic (Fearful) Dogs:** Xenophobia means “fear or hatred of things strange or foreign.” Dogs with xenophobic temperaments (due to genetics and/or puppyhood experiences) are more inclined to travel farther and are at a higher risk of being hit by cars. Due to their cowering, fearful behavior, people assume these dogs were “abused,” and even if the dog has ID tags, they will refuse to contact the previous owner. Some of these panic-stricken dogs will even run from their owners! It may be necessary to use other dogs to get close enough to capture them or to use baited dog traps.

## Circumstances Surrounding the Disappearance

A dog that digs out from a yard to explore a scent will tend to travel a short distance before it is found meandering and doubling back as it explores a scent. On the other hand, a dog that bolts in panic due to fireworks or thunder will take off at a blind run and can run for several miles.

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**Weather:** A dog that escapes on a beautiful spring day may travel farther than one that escapes in a snowstorm. Extreme weather conditions (snow, hail, rain, sweltering heat) will decrease the distances that lost dogs travel.

**Terrain:** A dog that escapes in a residential area will not travel as far as a dog that escapes in a mountainous area. Fences that create barriers will influence a dog's travel since a dog will tend to take the "path of least resistance" when traveling. Cactus, heavy brush, and steep cliffs can be barriers that influence whether a dog continues on a path or changes directions.

**Appearance of the Dog:** What a dog looks like can influence how quickly it will be picked up by a rescuer. In general, most people are less inclined to pull over and attempt to grab a loose Pit Bull they perceive as being "aggressive" than they would a "friendly" Labrador Retriever. Also, size matters as people are more inclined to pick up small dogs because they look vulnerable and are easier to transport and house than large dogs. In addition, people are more likely to attempt to rescue a purebred dog that they perceive to have value than a mixed breed dog. When average motorists see a mixed breed dog trotting down the sidewalk, their impression is often that the dog belongs in the neighborhood or that it is a homeless stray. But when those same people see a Boston Terrier, they are inclined to believe that, because it is a "valuable purebred dog," it must be a lost pet.

**Population Density:** A dog that escapes in Manhattan will travel a shorter distance than will a dog that escapes in the Rockies or in rural farmland. When dogs escape into areas with a high number of people, their chances of being found close to the escape point are increased. But in areas with an extremely low number of people, dogs tend to travel farther and their chances of being found close to the escape point are decreased. A dog that escapes in the middle of the night will travel farther before being seen than a dog that escapes during rush hour traffic.

## Owner Behaviors That Create Problems

Dog owners often behave in ways that actually inhibit their chances of recovering their lost dogs. Some develop a "wait and see" approach (believing their dog will return home like Lassie) and by the time they start actively looking, the vital first few hours to locate the dog (or witnesses who saw the dog) are gone. Others develop "tunnel vision" and fail to find their dog because they focus on wrong theories. They assume their dog was "stolen and sold to research" when in fact their dog might have been rescued and put up for adoption through a local adoption event. They experience "grief avoidance" and quickly give up their search effort because they really believe they will never see their dog again. They feel helpless and alone, often discouraged by others who rebuke them and tell them "it was just a dog" and "you'll never find your dog."

In addition, the level of human animal bond (HAB) will influence the recovery efforts. People with a strong HAB will go to extremes to find their lost dog. They will accomplish the "impossible" task of visiting all shelters, posting flyers, and contacting rescue groups while maintaining a full-time job

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and other family commitments. On the other hand, people with a weak HAB will quickly become discouraged, assume they will never see their dog again, and will stop searching.

## Rescuer Behaviors That Create Problems

People who find stray dogs often misinterpret the dog's behavior; they assume that the cowering, fearful dog was "abused" when in fact the dog has a xenophobic temperament and has been shy and fearful since it was a puppy, due to genetics and puppyhood experiences. Dogs found in rural areas are often assumed to be "dumped" and homeless; many rescuers never think this could be a dog that was lost. Some people who find a stray dog that does not have a collar automatically assume it is "homeless" and therefore they immediately work to place the dog rather than attempt to find the dog's owner. In addition, the first place the owner of a lost dog will search for his or her dog – the local shelter – is typically the last place that someone who finds a loose dog will take it (due to the fear of euthanasia)!

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